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Memorializing the Holocaust: *Schindler's List* and Public Memory

Half a century old, the Holocaust still mocks the idea of civilization and threatens our sense of ourselves as spiritual creatures. Its undiminished impact on modern memory leaves wide open the unsettled and unsettling question of why this should be so. (1995; p. 184)

—Lawrence Langer

In the closing lines to *Admitting the Holocaust*, Lawrence Langer suggests that the Holocaust continues today to be profoundly disturbing, disturbing in the most fundamental of senses. It calls into question our understanding of the world and ourselves in that world. It explodes traditional conceptions of humanity, morality, and social conscience. It lies at the borders of the unspeakable and the unimaginable. These ruptures in our basic systems of thought have left many individuals and communities seeking resolution, comfort, security, and even salvation. That is, so disruptive is the memory of the Holocaust, that there exists a strong impulse to find refuge. The means by which individuals and communities seek to fulfill this desire, though diverse, are never without social and political consequences. One approach has been denial, to simply diffuse the difficult questions and issues raised by the Holocaust by erasing the Holocaust itself. As Lipsadt (1993) illustrates, this particular revisionist approach is undergirded by a deep-seeded anti-Semitism.

But the desire for ideological refuge from the Holocaust is not always racist or for that matter even conscious. Nevertheless, such impulses deserve our reflection and interrogation. For some the desire for resolution and comfort manifests itself in memorial acts. A community, for instance, may erect a monument to the Holocaust as a way of giving it form, of making it manageable, and of creating catharsis. While monuments serve many important social functions, they often relieve us of our memory-burden, our social responsibility to engage in memory-work. Memory-work is not merely about remembering and forgetting, it is about connecting memory to ongoing events, to the self in contemporary society, to social conscience.¹ Thus, it is imperative that cultural workers examine the sites of memory construction and consider the ways in which they activate or disallow the

process of memory-work. The issue is whether a Holocaust memorial offers refuge from our memory-burden or inspires internal struggle, self-reflection on community, and conscience. Young (1993) describes the critic's task when he writes, "[r]ather than merely identifying the movements and forms on which public memory is borne, or asking whether these monuments reflect past history accurately or fashionably, we turn to the many ways this art suggests itself as a basis for political and social action" (pp. 12-13).

No effort to memorialize the Holocaust has been as far reaching in American culture as Steven Spielberg's 1994 film, *Schindler's List*. Commercially, the modestly budgeted \$22 million film exceeded nearly everyone's expectations, even those of its director and production company. By industry standards, the film was an even greater success, capturing seven Oscars, including best dramatic picture and best director. As a result of its nearly unanimous acclaim, *Schindler's List* is now being heralded as a watershed event in Hollywood. Reviewers hold it up as a model of how entertainment can be used to convey a serious educational message.² In light of its cultural scope, this essay seeks to describe the relationship between the film and public memory surrounding the Holocaust. While *Schindler's List* is undoubtedly an aesthetic and artistic masterpiece, I contend that it not only fails to create but structurally disallows self-reflective spaces for internal memory-work. Rather than prompting us to struggle with the difficult issues of the Holocaust, the film is structured in such a way as to completely shoulder our memory-burden. By analyzing its formal elements, I demonstrate how *Schindler's List* fuels our desire for resolution and comfort which it then fulfills by constructing an ideologically conservative sanctuary for the spectator. I conclude the essay by considering the social and political implications of such a project. In advancing the argument of this essay, I do not wish to judge the film in any simplistic sense. There is much about the film that is important, provocative, and productive. I believe it is possible to retain these elements while at the same time suggesting the film's principal shortcomings.

DRAMATIC FILM AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

One characteristic that distinguishes cinema from other art forms, explains Metz (1974), is that "films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle" (p. 4). The central way in which films generate the perception of reality is through movement. Unlike photographs, films are able to create the impression that objects have concrete life by setting them in motion. On film, actors or agents appear to have human agency and events seemingly unfold before our eyes. This is part of the seductive power of "motion" pictures. They draw us into the narrative by making us witness to the narrative. While films create the impression of reality, that is not to say we believe that the actions and events we are observing are "really"

happening or ever "really" happened. On the contrary, spectators may lose themselves in a film because it appears real without ever losing sight of the fact that it is a constructed reality, a fictional reality. This distinction is important to our understanding of *Schindler's List* because at every turn Spielberg attempts to subvert it. Above all, Spielberg wants us to forget that we are watching a dramatic film. In this section, I explore how *Schindler's List* blurs the line between dramatic film and historical document and consider how that positions the spectator.

Formally, Spielberg uses two primary techniques to give his film the feel of a documentary. First, the film is shot almost entirely in black-and-white. The only exceptions are the beginning, ending, and several selectively colored frames. Since monochromatic film is the principle medium used to shoot documentaries, its use in this instance creates the perception of objectivity generally associated with documentary filmmaking. But on another level, it does something more. Color is the language of the present and black-and-white the language of the past. Historical documents such as old photographs, letters, contracts, and other printed materials are usually black-and-white. The fact that *Schindler's List* is a monochromatic film gives it a historical quality and encourages the impression that it is itself a historical document. Spielberg was so keenly aware of this that during the filming he remarked to the cast, "we're not making a film, we're making a document" (Schickel, 1993; p. 75). To the extent that historical documents lend credibility to the events they document, Spielberg's film gives credence to its own narrative. The second technique Spielberg employs involves the use of hand-held cameras. While most contemporary films rely on dolly-mounted equipment, many of the scenes in *Schindler's List* were shot using hand-held cameras. This has the dual effect of making the action seem more immediate and evoking the documentary feel. As Spielberg explains, "I wanted to do more CNN reporting with a camera I could hold in my hand" (Schickel, 1993; p. 75). Nearly 30 percent of *Schindler's List* is filmed with hand-held cameras. When combined with the monochromatic film, the result is a product that looks more like live, unedited footage than dramatic film.

In addition to these technical conventions, Spielberg took several other steps to ensure that the audience's experience of viewing the film would be akin to reading a historical document. Though widely recognized in Hollywood for his technical skill in creating elaborate and fantastic worlds such as the imaginary island in *Jurassic Park* and the archaeological sites in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Spielberg filmed *Schindler's List*, whenever possible, on location. In Kraków, he used the actual factory Schindler had operated and even the apartment he once occupied. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, he shot under the towering gate of the death camp itself.³ By shooting on location, Spielberg forged an intersection between spatial reality and narrative that contributed to a sense of history experienced. To further sustain this perception, he carefully selected actresses and actors whom the audience would not immediately recognize. The director's goal in casting lesser known actors Liam Neeson and Ralph Fiennes as Oskar Schindler and

Amon Goeth was to make the audience forget that they were actors at all. With regard to Oskar Schindler, Spielberg explained, "I was looking for the actual guy, as close to the actual man as I could find. Liam did a spectacular test for me, and I like the fact that although he's not an unknown actor, he's not a star either" (Richardson, 1994; 70). In the conclusion of the film, Spielberg momentarily drops the illusion he has created by having the surviving *Schindlerjuden* (Schindler Jews) appear on screen with the actresses and actors who portrayed them. But the appearance of the *Schindlerjuden* in the film functions to legitimate its historical authenticity. Even as it reveals the illusion, it lends credence and authority to the narrative. As the *Schindlerjuden* and their descendants pass by Schindler's tomb, they place stones on his grave site. In this powerful tribute to Schindler, past and present are joined and a sense of historical unity emerges. Thus, the moment is not nearly as disruptive to the film's illusion as it may first appear.

There is one final stylistic matter that significantly reaffirms the spectator's feeling that she is experiencing history. Spielberg (re)creates a number of dehumanizing experiences on film. In one scene, prisoners at Plaszów run naked in circles before camp doctors who are looking to separate the healthy from the sick. The audience's privileged knowledge that the healthy will remain at the camp as forced laborers while the sick are sent to their deaths makes the scene all the more chilling. In another, equally disturbing sequence near the film's end, the women who were mistakenly sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau are herded shivering, naked, their heads shaved into showers. Suddenly, the showers turn dark and the women cry out. In this instance, the audience's lack of privileged knowledge—not knowing whether the showers will release water or lethal gas—invites viewers to identify with the women's horror. Like the women, viewers, are momentarily suspended in fear. As Spielberg recognizes, these scenes do not merely represent dehumanizing experiences, they (re)create them. Reflecting on his direction, Spielberg states, "the worst days came any time I had to have people take their clothes off and be humiliated and reduce themselves down to livestock" (Schickel, 1993; p. 76). In capturing dehumanizing experiences on film, Spielberg collapses the psychic space between drama and historical reality making it nearly impossible for the viewer to conceive of the images as somehow less than real.

The transformation from dramatic film to historical document that I have been describing is not limited to the viewing experience of *Schindler's List*, however. Individuals also experience films outside of theaters. Two examples are conversations with friends and press reviews. I would like to focus briefly on the latter since it often influences the former. Due, at least in part, to the film's subject matter, it received substantial press coverage prior to its screen debut. Though numerous and varied, reviews of the film are characterized by two features. The first feature is the repeated use of the word "historical" as a descriptor of the film.⁴ To describe a narrative as "historical" is to give it temporal authenticity. Its consistent use in the press to describe *Schindler's List*, authorizes the film's account of past events.

This characteristic does not necessarily predispose spectators to think of the film as a document, but it does subvert the film's fictional nature. A second and even more pervasive feature in press reviews of the film is its identification with Thomas Keneally's 1982 nonfiction account of Oskar Schindler's life. In reporting that the film was "based upon" the "nonfiction" work by Keneally, reviews reinforced the idea that the film testifies to the past, that it documents historical events. The film's frequent association with the award winning book further legitimates the (hi)story presented by the film.

Thus far, I have argued that both the press reviews of *Schindler's List* and the director's formal and stylistic choices function to implode the traditional borders between dramatic film and historical document. I turn now to how this break down positions the spectator in relation to the narrative. In most films, the viewer's recognition that she is observing a constructed reality creates a psychic space where she can comfortably retreat in response to feelings evoked by the film. Anyone who has ever watched a horror film and attempted to calm himself by thinking "this isn't real" has relied on the space I am describing. But *Schindler's List* eliminates this space. In creating the perception that it is a historical document, the film does not allow one to think "this isn't real." The effect is actually the opposite. The stronger the emotion evoked, the more "real" the narrative seems. As a result, the viewer must resolve emotion within the narrative of the film itself. In other words, to the extent that *Schindler's List* creates feelings of anomie, fear, or discomfort, spectators can only find resolution and comfort within the narrative. The remainder of this essay describes how the film evokes particular emotions and then resolves them.

GOETH AND SCHINDLER: FROM ANOMIE TO ORDER

The Holocaust story told in *Schindler's List* is crafted around the lives of its protagonist, Oskar Schindler, and antagonist, Amon Goeth. This fact is not without its own political implications. Of all the possible perspectives from which a narrative could be constructed around the Holocaust, the first major Hollywood effort focused not on the lives of Holocaust victims, but on a reluctant hero who overcomes overwhelming odds by outsmarting a ruthless, inhumane enemy. This formula is familiar not only to most Americans, but in light of *Jaws*, *Raiders of the Lost Arc*, and *Jurassic Park* apparently to Spielberg as well. In *Schindler's List*, Spielberg uses this formula to generate intense feelings of anomie which he later alleviates by re-establishing order. At first, the Nazis and more specifically Amon Goeth disrupt our faith in the human spirit, but shortly a morally driven Oskar Schindler emerges to reaffirm our belief in humanity. In short, what the film does is create moral chaos which it then resolves. It is a process which evokes strong emotions from beginning to end. But what the film fails to do is prompt us to reflect on the causes and effects of the moral chaos, to internalize the memory, to connect it to social conscience, or to judge the usefulness or value of the previous order.

From the moment we are introduced to Oskar Schindler, we are irresistibly drawn toward him. Though we do not know him, we are captivated by his charm, his presence. Spielberg's editing of the scene in which we meet Schindler ensures that this is the case. As Schindler is escorted and seated at a table in a fine Kraków restaurant, the camera surveys the room from his point of view. The joining of our (the camera's) gaze with Schindler's begins a process of identification that will continue throughout the film. Maintaining Schindler's point of view, the camera flirts briefly with a woman seated across the room before it comes to rest on the "reserved" sign at an empty table. The camera's lingering gaze on the sign signals Schindler's interest in it, while at the same time creating our interest by prompting us to wonder about its significance. A woman in an elegant evening gown enters with two Nazi officers and they are seated at another table. Schindler sends the trio a bottle of wine and we sense that the game is afoot. At first, one Nazi joins Schindler at his table, then another, then the woman, and soon everyone in the restaurant is gathered around him, laughing, singing, and drinking. By the time the Nazi commander arrives and is seated at his "reserved" table, Oskar Schindler has been transformed from an unknown small-time businessman into the most prominent figure in the room. When the commander asks the maitre d' who that man is, he replies, "why that's Oskar Schindler," in a tone of voice that suggests Schindler is the most important figure in all of Poland. Never mind that the name Oskar Schindler meant nothing to the maitre d' an hour earlier. Spielberg's synoptic editing of Schindler's swash-buckling machinations makes him all the more dynamic and alluring. In a series of quick shots, we observe Schindler being photographed with Nazi officers, night club dancers, and finally the Nazi commander. As the frames whisk by on the screen, the audience is whisked with them. Positioned in the center of every frame and shot from low-angles, Schindler commands our attention and our reverence. The people in the restaurant cannot get enough of Oskar Schindler and neither can those in the theater. Both audiences delight in his presence.

The year is 1941 and the Jews in Nazi-controlled Kraków are forced, after being dispossessed of their businesses, to relocate to a small, run-down part of the city known as the ghetto. It is in this context, the audience learns, that Oskar Schindler conceives of and begins to execute his plan to get rich quick. After obtaining money from two Jewish elders, Schindler purchases a deserted enamelware factory with plans to manufacture pots and pans for the Nazi war machine. He then hires Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley), a member of the local *judenrat* (Jewish council), to serve as his accountant and plant manager. Since Jewish labor is cheap—what little they earn is paid directly to the SS—Schindler decides to build his labor force from ghetto Jews. Recognizing that employees who are classified as "essential workers" are protected from "resettlement" to concentration camps, Stern seizes the opportunity to save Jewish lives by adding children and other unskilled individuals to the factory rolls. Thus, despite

Schindler's charm, Stern provides the strong moral force at this point in the film. As likable and charismatic as Schindler is, the audience knows he is a hedonist and womanizer, a Nazi sympathizer and war profiteer. Yet, the viewer is assured in subtle ways that this will all change and his true character will emerge.

In one scene, Oskar, while dining with his wife, tells her that, "They won't soon forget the name Schindler here. I can tell you that. 'Oskar Schindler,' they'll say. Everybody remembers him. He did something extraordinary. He did something no one else did." Though Schindler is referring to the money he will make off of his enamelware factory, the words foreshadow the extraordinary thing that he really will do and be remembered for in the future. A short time later, Schindler expresses disgust to an SS official over the summary execution of one of his workers by Nazi brutes. Regardless of Schindler's claim that he is angry because losing an essential worker costs him money, the audience knows that the real reason goes deeper. Previously in the narrative, this worker had come to Schindler and thanked him profusely for his graciousness. Schindler's discomfort as the man praised his goodness signaled to the audience Schindler's coming moral awakening. Another signal to the audience was the way Schindler justified his anger. Since the man was old and disabled, Schindler's argument that he was "highly skilled" was insufficient to account for his emotion. Hence, as the narrative continues to develop, Schindler's indifference toward the treatment of the Jews and his outward projection of ambition and greed appear to be nothing more than a cover for his compassionate efforts to help as many Jews as he can. It is at this point that the audience is introduced to *Untersturmführer* Amon Goeth and faith in the moral order is seriously disrupted.

Throughout the film, the Nazi commandant, Amon Goeth, is portrayed as the epitome of evil. In the viewer's first experience with the commandant, he is surveying the Jewish ghetto from the back seat of a Mercedes convertible. Goeth is touring the ghetto because he has been ordered to liquidate it and relocate the Jews to the Plaszów forced labor camp now under construction. His cold nature is established immediately when the Nazi officer in the front seat asks Goeth, "Do you have any questions, Sir?" and he replies annoyed, "Ya, why is top down? I'm fucking freezing." His statement is disturbingly ironic given that the ghetto streets are filled with hundreds of Jews huddled around fires in a losing attempt to stay warm. The viewer's initial revulsion to Goeth is further inscribed in the next scene. Goeth has returned to Plaszów and he is in the process of selecting a Jewish woman to be his housekeeper. As near as the viewer can tell, he selects Helen Hirsch (Embeth Davidtz) because she is the most frightened of him. It is becoming apparent to the viewer that Goeth revels in creating fear. In fact, his very next action is to order the death of the camp's foreman of construction, a Jewish woman with an engineering degree. After the woman advises Goeth that one of the building's foundations should be torn down and rebuilt, he has her shot in the head in front of the other workers.

That he then takes the woman's advice attests to his psychotic nature. In both of these events, Goeth's action is utterly unpredictable. It is through this unpredictable brutality that Spielberg is so easily able to evoke feelings of anomie in the audience. The whimsical and random brutality of Goeth defies any attempt by the spectator to make rational sense of his actions. The moral order is exploded. Never knowing how Goeth will act, viewers are completely at his mercy. Goeth's actions become a trope for the Holocaust; unexplainable and unthinkable, they are profoundly disorienting. This is why the experience of watching *Schindler's List*, at times, leaves the viewer feeling numb.

At this point in the narrative, viewers witness the turbulent, almost unbearably vivid liquidation of the ghetto. At fifteen minutes, it is an extraordinarily long scene, one which both intensifies our feelings of anomie and fuels our desire for order. The scene begins with Goeth's speech to the SS troops. In preparation for the liquidation, he tells them,

Today is history. Today will be remembered. Years from now, the young will ask with wonder about this day. Today is history and you are part of it. Six hundred years ago, ... the Jews [were told] they could come to Kraków. They came. They carried their belongings into the city, they settled, they took hold, they prospered in business, science, education, the arts. They came here with nothing, nothing, and they flourished. For six centuries there has been a Jewish Kraków. Think about that. By this evening those six centuries are a rumor. They never happened. Today is history.

Goeth's speech is, for the viewer, one of the most disturbing moments in *Schindler's List*. It is disturbing not because the moment is reflective, however. The audience is not prompted to think about the implications of the holocaust or to connect it to social conscience. Rather, the viewer is drawn into the (hi)story. The hideousness of the Nazi acts become overwhelmingly immediate and undeniable. The result is feelings of emotional and moral chaos, feelings which become even more intense as the audience is suddenly barraged with rapid shots of Nazis running through ghetto streets, clearing out buildings, trashing suitcases, and brutally murdering frightened Jews. The action is violent and chaotic. Terrified Jews scramble for hiding places, ducking under beds, crawling into furniture, and jumping into holes. Like them, the viewer desperately wants to find a safe place away from this disorder. But the camera does not allow it. In shot after shot, viewers are swept along with the confusion. As Kraków grows dark, the action begins to slow down and the viewer believes that the scene is coming to an end. But the Nazis are only waiting for those in hiding to come out. There is a creak in the floor, then the deep sound of a piano, and it all begins again. Nazis trample through tenements, blasts from machine guns light up rooms, blood sprays walls and pavement. When the next break in the commotion comes, Goeth is splashing water on his face. He mutters, "I wish this fucking night were over," and so too do we. But the scene does not end there, and neither does "this night." By repeatedly leading us to believe that the chaos is over and then extending it, Spielberg increases our desire for the restoration of moral order. To our dismay, when

the long scene (night) finally ends, the moral chaos remains. In the next scene, Goeth, lounging shirtless on the balcony of his villa at Plaszow, entertains himself by randomly shooting prisoners. Again, Spielberg has created the expectation of order and withheld it. By now, the viewer is completely disoriented and distraught.

But Spielberg's world cannot tolerate such moral chaos forever. Eventually, the moral order must be restored. As we have seen, Spielberg builds the intense desire for the re-establishment of the moral order and the comfort it provides into the narrative of the film. Thus, the viewer wildly desires resolution. It is precisely at this moment of utter chaos—when the audience most needs its moral hero to emerge, to come riding in on his horse and save the day—that Schindler, riding a horse no less, has his moral awakening. The liquidation scene is intercut with shots of Schindler riding to a hilltop that overlooks the city and watching the mass human destruction. Schindler's gaze ultimately falls upon a small girl in a red coat. Against the monochromatic film, the coat is eerily vivid. Schindler follows the child through the chaos of Kraków, action erupting all around her. From the look on his face the audience knows that he is deeply moved. The little girl in the red coat has personalized the war for Schindler in a way that will no longer allow him to ignore the Nazi atrocities. The remainder of the film tracks Schindler's struggle to restore the moral order, to undermine Nazi efforts, to create a safe haven for Jews and in the process for the audience. The stage has been set for a showdown between good and evil.

After the liquidation of the ghetto on March 13, 1943, Schindler immediately begins to engage in acts of resistance. His first move is to forge a social relationship with Goeth. I describe this as a move because, though their relationship is complex, the film creates the impression that Schindler is manipulating Goeth. In fact, it is only a short time before Schindler, using both his charm and money, convinces Goeth to allow him to operate his own sub-camp from the enamelware factory. Once he is back in business, Schindler begins bringing those workers who are in the most danger at Plaszów over to his sub-camp. He does this by bribing the Plaszów SS with valuable personal possessions such as his lighter, cigarette case, and watch. But Schindler's resistance is not limited to the haven he creates from Goeth's monstrous treatment of prisoners. After a party at Goeth's villa, for instance, Schindler attempts to alter the commandant's sadistic behavior by appealing to his desire for power. He tells him,

They fear us because we have the power to kill arbitrarily. A man commits a crime, he should know better. We have him killed and we feel pretty good about it. Or we kill him ourselves, we feel even better. That's not power though, that's justice. That's different than power. Power is when we have every justification to kill and we don't. That's what the Emperor said. A man stole something, he's brought in before the Emperor, he throws himself down on the ground, he begs for mercy, he knows he's going to die. And the Emperor pardons him. This worthless man, he let's him go. That's power. Amon. That is power.

The next day the audience observes a change in Goeth. First, he excuses his stable-boy for an act that previously would have ensured his death, then he comes to the aid of a Jewish woman being mistreated by a Nazi guard, and finally he pardons his house-boy for failing to remove the stains from his bathtub. The shots are pieced together smoothly and the audience is encouraged to take comfort in the fact that moral order has begun to be restored. Still in his bathroom, Goeth stares into the mirror. The mirror is Spielberg's way of allowing the viewer to see the evil inside Goeth. It is a signal of the horror to come. In a slow tracking shot, the camera follows the house-boy away from Goeth's villa. The audience's anticipation of violence grows. A gunshot pierces the silence, but the bullet strikes the ground at the boy's feet. The viewer's fear has been confirmed but not realized, adding to it. The camera switches to Goeth's point of view, charging the frame with fear and anticipation. Having seen the evil that Goeth represents, the point of view shot repels the viewer instead of creating identification. Another shot is fired and the boy drops to the ground. Again, Spielberg has teased the audience with order and comfort and delivered only chaos and fear in the form of Goeth. The result is twofold. The viewer's desire for resolution has been inscribed even more deeply and his total revulsion of Goeth assured. Thus, at this point, any act Schindler takes that undermines Goeth or what he represents serves to strengthen the audience's belief in him as a moral savior.

In a brief scene depicting Schindler's birthday party, the idea that Schindler will restore moral order through personal sacrifice is foreshadowed. As Schindler drinks with Nazi officers and cavorts with beautiful women, in a manner reminiscent of his introductory scene, a Jewish woman and child bring him cake and thank him on behalf of his workers. In gratitude, Schindler kisses both the woman and child. In as much as German law prohibits kissing Jews, the act is terribly subversive. It signals that Schindler is willing to endanger himself in the name of what is right. It also further contrasts him with Goeth who in a subsequent scene brutally beats a Jewish woman precisely because he desires to kiss her. As the narrative moves forward, Spielberg continues to juxtapose the two men. As a result, by the time Goeth receives the order to shut down his camp and ship all remaining prisoners to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the audience has completely entrusted its safety to Schindler. The knowledge that Auschwitz is a death camp has raised the moral chaos to such an intense level that the viewer is utterly helpless, she has given herself over to the narrative. But Schindler acts quickly to save his workers and by extension the audience. He bribes Goeth to allow him to transport his workers to Brinnlitz, a small Czechoslovakian town on the Polish border, where he plans to open a munitions factory. Schindler spends nearly his entire fortune to establish this new business and purchase the lives of 1,100 Jews. Finally, moral resolution and comfort are in sight.

But as so many times before, the audience is instead taken on another tumultuous train ride. In preparation to ship Schindler's Jews to Brinnlitz,

the men and women are loaded onto separate trains. After the men arrive, Schindler learns that the train carrying the women has mistakenly been sent to Auschwitz because of a paperwork error. So, he races across the country to stage a last minute rescue. By the time he arrives, the women have already been processed. They have also—through the emotionally encoded shower scene I described earlier—been humiliated and forced to confront the possibility of death. Through more lies and bribery, Schindler manages to have the women put back on a train and shipped safely to his factory in Brinnlitz. But when they arrive, they do not rush to their husbands, nor do their husbands rush to them. There is no celebration, no sense of joy. The Schindler Jews have experienced so much emotional turmoil, they are numb. Likewise, the viewer has by this point, if not before, experienced so much emotional turmoil that he too is numb. Schindler has created a haven for his workers (and the audience), but it is only a haven. The world is still in moral chaos, the human spirit remains shattered.

For Spielberg, these conditions make the notion of narrative closure at this point unthinkable. The ending can only occur once the world has been brought to a better state than when the narrative began. Thus, the moral order must be restored, emotional healing must begin, and there must be hope for the future. The audience's first sign that the human spirit will prevail and that moral order will be re-established occurs when Schindler, on May 7, 1945, learns of Germany's unconditional surrender to the Allied forces. But *Schindler's List* is not a film about community. It is not a story about how the nations of the world formed the Allied forces to defeat the German war machine. It is a story about the heroic actions of one individual. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Oskar Schindler is central to creating the audience's perception that moral order has been restored. He does this during a speech to his workers and the Nazi guards at Brinnlitz. Addressing the guards, Schindler admonishes,

I know you have received orders from the commandant, which he has received from his superiors, to dispose of the population of this camp. Now would be the time to do it. Here they are, they're all here. This is your opportunity. Or you could leave and return to your families as men, instead of murderers.

At this point, the SS guards turn and file silently out of the factory. The audience now knows that the moral chaos is over. But this knowledge does not erase the black mark on humanity or resolve the strong emotions evoked throughout the film. Only an act of salvation could offer such comfort and resolution. In Schindler's final scene, Spielberg delivers this act.

With the war over, Schindler, a member of the Nazi party and profiteer of slave labor, must now flee for his life. As he prepares to leave Brinnlitz, his workers present him with a gold ring bearing the Talmudic inscription, "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire." Based on his actions, the inscription explicitly identifies Schindler as a savior. While Judaism does not embrace the New Testament or its teachings, I would like to suggest that this scene, when read through the lens of Christianity, can best be

interpreted as a symbolic crucifixion. Schindler is so emotionally shaken at this point that the ring falls from his hand. He drops to his knees as though collapsing under the weight of a symbolic cross. But his willingness to bear this cross, to sacrifice himself to save the world is confirmed as he lifts the ring and slides it onto his finger. There is a brief pause and then Schindler begins his self-lashing.

I could have got more out. I could have got more. I don't know, if I just, I could have got more. If I'd made more money. I threw away so much money. You have no idea. If I had just. I didn't do enough. This car. Goeth would have bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people, ten more people. This pin for two people. This is gold. Two more people. He would have given me two more, at least one. He would have given me one, one more. One more person. A person, Stern. For this, I could have got one more person and I didn't.

As Schindler falls to the ground weeping, "his Jews" huddle around him and comfort him. He has died a symbolic death to efface the sins of humanity. Schindler's symbolic crucifixion provides a vehicle for the audience's own outpouring of emotion. The moment of his symbolic death is for humanity a symbolic rebirth. This rebirth is expressed visually in the next scene as Schindler's Jews awaken to a new day and begin descending a sun-drenched hillside to the nearby town where they will begin their lives anew.

Schindler's self-castigation is the first in a series of cathartic scenes that Spielberg builds into the ending of *Schindler's List*. The next scene, for instance, portrays Goeth's execution. Visual text informs viewers that "Amon Goeth was arrested while a patient in a sanitarium at Bad Tolz. He was hanged in Kraków for crimes against humanity." Though brief, the scene is significant. To the extent that Goeth represents evil, witnessing his punishment (death) is cathartic in that it both assures the viewer that evil has been destroyed and justice has been served. Oddly enough, the scene is almost comedic. The executioner's difficulty in kicking the box from beneath Goeth's feet adds a certain levity that reinforces the viewer's pleasure in witnessing his death. Spielberg cuts next to a view of Schindler's enamelware factory in Kraków. The image is augmented with biographical information about Oskar Schindler. The text—which reads, "In 1958, he was declared a righteous person by the council of the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and invited to plant a tree in the Avenue of Righteousness."—reaffirms both the perception of Schindler as moral hero and the idea of new life. When the camera returns to Schindler's Jews making their way down the hillside, the audience, armed with the knowledge that evil has been destroyed, senses the promise of a better future. In the Spielberg world, promises made by the narrative are always fulfilled in the narrative. Slowly, the words, "It grows there still," appear on the screen. They suggest to the audience that like Schindler's tree, the *Schindlerjuden* have taken root and prospered. This perception is further strengthened as black-and-white is transformed into color, past into present, and the reel Schindler Jews into the real Schindler Jews.

In the film's final scene, the surviving Schindler Jews and their descendants commemorate Oskar Schindler's heroic actions by placing stones on his grave site. As they file past his grave, visual text informs viewers first that "There are fewer than four thousand Jews left alive in Poland today," and then that "There are more than six thousand descendants of the Schindler Jews." The juxtaposition of these two statements serves to dramatize the enormity of one individual's heroic actions. It is only now that the moral order has been re-established, that the audience has found emotional succor, and that hope has been reborn that *Schindler's List* can come, must come, to an end. The film closes with the epigraph, "In memory of the more than six million Jews murdered." To the degree that the film is itself a monument to the Holocaust, no ending could be more fitting. But in its desire to memorialize the Holocaust, *Schindler's List* shoulders our memory-burden.

MEMORY CONSCIENCE AND "SCHINDLER'S LIST"

In the final section of this essay, I have three objectives: to review briefly how *Schindler's List* relieves us of our memory-burden, to consider the subsequent social and political implications, and to propose some future possibilities. Spielberg's film "works" rhetorically by using the narrative to create desires which are then satisfied within the narrative. Since Spielberg structures the film to eliminate self-reflective spaces, the viewer succumbs to it. The narrative in *Schindler's List* begins by positioning the viewer in a world of moral chaos represented on one level by the Holocaust and on another by Goeth. It then fosters a desire for moral resolution and comfort which it ultimately fulfills through Oskar Schindler. This narrative structure has several notable consequences. First, it functions to privilege an individual perspective over a social one. The result is an Americanized story that neither suggests agents have any kind of social responsibility nor encourages viewers to consider larger issues of community and social conscience. Another consequence of the narrative structure is that it forces closure upon the viewer. When *Schindler's List* ends, when the (hi)story comes to a close, so too does the Holocaust. There is no invitation to connect memory of the Holocaust with contemporary events. By forcing resolution and comfort upon the viewer, the film fails to suggest itself as a basis for sociopolitical action and the viewer is absolved of such action. To put it bluntly, the film subverts possibilities for human agency. Furthermore, it suggests that the atrocities of the Holocaust have not substantially altered our vision of human dignity. In short, we are left with the dangerous idea that we need not actively guard against the possibility of this historical catastrophe occurring again.

In light of the conclusions I have drawn about *Schindler's List*, I would like to briefly address two related questions, one practical and the other more theoretical. Question 1: Is it possible to use *Schindler's List* as a

productive tool for educating students about the Holocaust? In brief, yes. Students can engage in memory-work if they are prompted to think critically about the film and its silences. Though the film does not readily invite an individual to consider questions about racism or the political conditions that would allow Hitler to come to power, there is no reason why these questions cannot be asked. In fact, given the human rights violations currently taking place around the globe, these are questions that need to be asked. Question 2: Is it possible to construct public memorials that do not relieve individuals of their memory-burden? Again, the answer is yes. The key is for public memorials to transform public spaces into public spheres. "Far too often," argues Young (1993), "a community's monuments assume the polished finished veneer of a death mask, unreflective of current memory, unresponsive of contemporary issues" (p. 14). In other words, forms that are too pleasing risk fading, along with memory, into the landscape. Once they are out of sight, they are out of mind. The best public memorials confront the viewer and unsettle him such that his identity is destabilized and memory-work is activated. Washington's Holocaust Museum is one example of a memorial that prompts viewers to consider serious questions about our collective moral quality without attempting to answer them. To the degree that memory-work calls upon individuals to be active agents in society, the public memorials that activate memory-work, that weave themselves into the course of ongoing events, play a central role in creating a more democratic society.

In his review of *Schindler's List* for *Commonweal* magazine, Alleva (1994) wrote, "This is a story not of unalleviated suffering but of succor and rescue" (p. 17). His assessment is, of course, accurate. Through the story of Oskar Schindler, Spielberg restores the human spirit, comforts us, and leaves humanity healing, maybe with a scar, but definitely not an open wound. Spielberg's film relieves us of our memory-burden precisely because it offers moral resolution of/comfort from a memory that should be neither resolved nor comforting. Writing on Holocaust literature, Langer (1995) asks, "How much darkness must we acknowledge before we will be able to confess that the Holocaust story cannot be told in terms of heroic dignity, moral courage, and the triumph of the human spirit?" (p. 158). *Schindler's List* is surely an artistic wonder to be marveled at, but like a stone obelisk this monument refuses to engage us in a dialogue.

Notes

1. For a more extended discussion of memory-work, see the introduction to James Young's *The Texture of Memory*. The issue of connecting public memory of the Holocaust to social conscience is also theorized by Lawrence Langer in *Admitting the Holocaust*, Deborah Lipstadt in *Denying the Holocaust*, and Harold Kaplan in *Conscience and Memory*. More general discussions of memory as it relates to sociopolitical action can be found in John Bodnar's *Remaking America* and John Gillis's edited volume, *Commemorations*.
2. Diegmüller's article in *Education Week* outlines the current public debate over Holocaust education and traces the role *Schindler's List* has played in that debate.

3. The World Jewish Congress vetoed Spielberg's request to shoot inside Auschwitz-Birkenau. As part of a compromise, however, Spielberg was allowed to build a replica of the death camp just outside of its gate. In the scene where Schindler's Jews are seen coming into Auschwitz by train, the train is actually leaving the real death camp and entering Spielberg's mirror set. Thus, a sense of spatial reality is maintained. See Richardson (1994, p. 93).
4. Rafferty (1993), for instance, calls it an "historical drama" (p. 130), while Pallot (1994), describes it as an "historical epic" (p. 238).

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